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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: ELECTORAL COMMISSION FACES MAJOR CHALLENGES IN EASTERN DRC

Classified By: PolOff CBrown, reasons 1.4 b/d.

11. (SBU) Summary: As it organizes the DRC's first free elections in more than 40 years, the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) faces significant logistical challenges, particularly in the eastern part of the country. The lack of an adequate transportation infrastructure makes delivering voting materials throughout the country difficult, thereby delaying the Commission's civic education campaign. A complicated payment system developed by the UNDP has resulted in CEI workers not being paid for several months and CEI offices not having sufficient materiel to conduct day-to-day operations. Meanwhile, militia activity poses significant security concerns, especially in Ituri District. The problems faced in the east generally reflect the overall challenges the CEI faces heading into elections. Despite these difficulties, however, CEI officials appear committed to successfully carrying out their mission to enable the July 30 first round elections. End summary.

12. (SBU) From May 4-10, PolOff visited North Kivu province and Ituri District in eastern DRC to meet with a variety of Congolese political actors, including the regional CEI coordinators in Beni, Butembo, Bunia, Mahagi and Aru. CEI officials PolOff met with were generally well-informed about the electoral process and appeared to realize the enormity of the task before them in organizing the country's first free elections. Nearly all, however, said their work was being made more difficult by two primary factors: lack of or inadequate financing for their operations; and security threats posed by militias and other armed groups.

THE MONEY PROBLEM

13. (C) From Beni to Aru, CEI officials all bemoaned the inadequate financing (particularly in terms of salaries) their offices received from CEI headquarters in Kinshasa and from the UN Development Program (UNDP), which manages the "basket fund" for the DRC's elections activities. In Beni and Butembo, for example, the CEI coordinators said they had not been paid since February. The CEI coordinator in Butembo, Georgette Kibendelwa, said CEI staff who had worked during the December constitutional referendum had not been paid since November 2005. CEI officials in Ituri District also said salaries had not been paid in several months. The CEI coordinator for Mahagi, Germain Ukumu, said UNDP's payment mechanisms were too complicated and too slow, resulting in scores of disenchanted workers. Nonetheless, CEI officials emphasized that despite late salaries, their respective offices were not having trouble recruiting enough agents to work during the forthcoming elections.

14. (C) One reason for the slowness in payments stems from the way in which UNDP and its partners, which are generally responsible for distributing salaries on the ground in the DRC's provinces (since there is no organized banking system), have managed the program. Beni's CEI coordinator, Paluku wa Tembo, explained one particularly glaring example of the failure to pay police officers who provided security during the referendum. Tembo said APEC (the UNDP's implementing partner) had contracted the Catholic relief organization Caritas International to pay police in Beni for their work. When Caritas arrived in Beni and established its offices to proceed with payments, it announced that police would have to come to Beni to be paid. However, many police were stationed outside Beni and had no means of traveling to receive their payments; moreover, police commanders issued orders preventing the police from leaving their posts to go to Beni and collect their salaries. Tembo said his office offered to transport for Caritas the money to police elsewhere in North Kivu, but Caritas refused, saying there were no provisions for such transport in APEC/UNDP regulations. Consequently, Tembo said fewer than half the police were paid, and Caritas simply left Beni after one week still in possession of the non-disbursed salaries (approximately USD 100,000). (Note: UNDP officials PolOff spoke to after hearing this story said Caritas was correct in following established guidelines, but efforts were currently being made to ensure all past arrears

would be paid as soon as possible. End note.)

SHORTFALL FALLOUT

15. (SBU) In addition to the lack of money for salaries, CEI officials in eastern DRC also face funding shortfalls for everyday operations. One of the more persistent problems has been the insufficient number of trucks and other vehicles needed to transport elections materials throughout the region. Most CEI liaison offices in North Kivu and Ituri in theory each have three or four trucks, in addition to 10-15 motorbikes and several more bicycles. However, CEI officials explained that the vehicles often break down or are not fully suited for transporting materials over long distances, especially in areas that have few, if any, passable roads. Paluku wa Tembo, the CEI coordinator in Beni, said his office was down to one functioning truck, since the other two the CEI had were in various states of disrepair, and there was no money to buy spare parts to fix them. July Angha, the CEI coordinator for Aru, said his office too only possessed one working truck, as did his counterpart in the Mahagi office. While MONUC will be assisting the CEI with transporting elections materials in the coming months, CEI officials on the ground said they worried about how they would be able to deliver equipment to more remote areas in time for the July 30 elections.

16. (SBU) The budget and logistics shortfalls have impacted the CEI's work in the pre-election period, notably its ability to conduct civic education campaigns. Ukumu and Angha both said their efforts to hold training sessions with political parties and civic education meetings with voters were limited because they did not have sufficient funds. Meanwhile, UNDP has financed only nine civic education projects in all of Mahagi and Aru territories, which include nearly 670,000 registered voters combined. In addition, because their offices lack adequate transportation means, the CEI programs are largely confined to the areas immediately surrounding Mahagi and Aru. Consequently, both said large numbers of the population outside the main towns were not receiving any information directly from the CEI, and thus were poorly informed about the electoral process as a whole. (Note: This assessment was shared by many others throughout North Kivu and Ituri regarding the CEI's role in civic education. However, several other NGOs have been conducting such programs, including the Catholic Church's CARTEC network, with a greater degree of success in eastern DRC. End note.)

THE PROBLEMS AHEAD

17. (SBU) The CEI will face logistical difficulties during the elections themselves. Following the lessons learned from the December referendum, the CEI increased the number of voting stations throughout the country to 53,000 (vice 40,000). In so doing, CEI officials anticipated the number of voters assigned per station would decrease to 500 on average (vice 750), thereby allowing voting operations to conclude in one day. (Note: The referendum, originally scheduled for one day, was extended a second day after thousands of voters were unable to cast ballots due to logistical and other delays. End note.) However, most CEI officials PolOff spoke to said it would still likely be impossible to finish voting in one day despite the increase in voting locations. Mahagi's CEI coordinator Germain Ukumu said that, even if just half the population turned out to vote, each voter would, on average, have less than three minutes to vote (for both presidential and legislative candidates, on separate ballots) if all voting operations were to be concluded in the allotted 11 hours. This average time per voter, though, will be even less throughout eastern DRC, as this region had one of the highest voter turnout rates (over 85 percent of eligible voters) in the country.

18. (SBU) CEI spokesman Dieudonne Mirimo said the Commission's solution to this problem is to allow those voters still in line when polls close at 5:00 p.m. to cast ballots. Mirimo said the president of each voting site will be allowed to make that decision independently and can carry out voting until all voters have cast their ballots, regardless of the hour. The problem this presents is that since much of the DRC lacks reliable sources of electricity, voting will be taking place literally in the dark. The CEI does not have the means to provide all voting centers with enough generators and fuel to continue voting past sunset. While a battery-operated lamp will be provided to each voting station for the counting process, these lamps are unlikely to be able to illuminate an entire room.

19. (C) If voting were to be extended a second day (which CEI President Abbe Apollinaire Malu Malu has insisted will not happen), other logistical problems will emerge. The primary

concern for CEI officials will be securing ballots and voting centers overnight, as well as communicating well in advance the procedures for safeguarding election materials. CEI officials in eastern DRC told PolOff there have been no discussions with national CEI authorities regarding this possibility, even though they have raised their concerns to Kinshasa several times. To avoid this problem during the referendum, in many cases election workers slept at the voting stations to ensure the safety of ballots already cast.

10. (C) Furthermore, as pointed out by Germain Ukumu in Mahagi, several CEI offices do not have sufficient storage facilities to hold election material before the vote takes place. Ukumu said he was still trying to find secure locations in which to place ballot boxes, voting booths and ballots, and added that he did not know if his office in any case would be able to pay the required rental fees. In many locations, MONUC will store voting material before it is delivered to voting sites. However, even MONUC officials admitted they lack adequate storage facilities, and pointed out as well that MONUC does not have such locations in most areas.

SECURITY FEARS

11. (C) Another major concern of CEI officials in eastern DRC is the security threat posed by militias and other armed groups, as well as (in more isolated incidents) the Congolese military. CEI officials in Beni and Butembo said the continuing activities of Mai Mai and FDLR forces in North Kivu contributed to an overall sense of instability, making it more difficult for them to distribute election materials and to conduct civic education campaigns. Officials in North Kivu said they thought MONUC and the international community needed to do more to secure the elections process and to ensure that these groups would not try to reverse election results. Likewise, in Ituri, CEI officials said a good deal of their work -- particularly in Mahagi territory -- was hampered by militia presence. The CEI coordinators of Bunia and Mahagi also said certain elements of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) contributed to security problems by stealing voter registration cards from civilians and harassing election workers delivering materials in the field. Overall, though, most CEI officials said they were more concerned about the post-electoral security situation.

12. (C) In addition to these external threats, CEI offices in the east (and in many other parts of the DRC) have faced problems from their own workers. A primary motivation for these disaffected workers has been financial gain. In Aru, for example, a former CEI computer expert was found guilty of stealing more than 20 computers, 10 printers, seven scanners and two cameras from the CEI's offices there. Eight of the stolen computers were recovered (four of them in Uganda), but the rest of the material remains missing and has not been replaced. CEI officials in North Kivu and Ituri said they had all been victims of petty theft, and disgruntled workers had on several occasions protested outside CEI offices for not being paid. While CEI officials PolOff met with said they did not expect major disruptions from their workers during the elections, they nonetheless admitted that if salaries were not paid promptly, it would certainly affect morale.

CEI WORKING ON SOLUTIONS

13. (C) National CEI officials say they are aware of the problems in eastern DRC and throughout the rest of the country. The CEI's 2nd Vice President, Norbert Basengezi, said the Commission was in the process of paying salaries still owed to election workers, and that he hoped all payments would be made by the end of May. (Note: Nearly 80 CEI workers in Mahagi were being paid when PolOff visited CEI offices there May 8. End note.) As for the lack of equipment and financing, CEI President Malu Malu told PolOff during a May 15 meeting that the CEI was currently conducting an audit of all its provincial offices to determine what needs still had to be met before the July 30 elections. Malu Malu said he realized provincial offices still required some basic items like photocopiers, but he was not sure how the CEI would come up with the money needed for these projects in time.

COMMENT: PROBLEMS ARE REAL, BUT NOT INSURMOUNTABLE

14. (SBU) Some of the concerns expressed by CEI officials in eastern DRC regarding money and logistics are exaggerated. While payment for workers has been slow, CEI provincial offices are sometimes themselves to blame for submitting incomplete receipts and managing funds improperly. In terms of logistics, MONUC will provide the bulk of transportation assistance before elections, giving CEI officials enough time

to put together plans to ensure the delivery of materials in a timely manner. Nonetheless, the monetary shortfalls CEI officials experience have impacted their ability to conduct civic education campaigns, which is a disservice to the voting population. The difficulties election workers face are real, but not insurmountable. Certainly, there will be many logistical and other errors during the vote, as a project of this magnitude has never been undertaken in a country like the DRC that lacks basic infrastructure. Security remains an ever-present issue as well. But if the experience of the referendum is any guide, voting will take place, albeit with difficulties. Despite these challenges, CEI officials remain committed to seeing elections through to the end, and benefit as well from a population in eastern DRC that strongly supports the electoral process. End comment.

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